

Author's note: When I began writing my next column on Transfeminism, I realized that I was quoting extensively from an important book about stigma management. In advent of the second column in this series, I present the following review, which hopefully will prepare readers for a more thorough understanding of passing privilege – the subject of the next month's column.

**Passing As Stigma Management - An Analytic Review of
Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity by Erving Goffman**

(1963: Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ)

by Jessica Xavier

Transgendered people, like other sexual minorities, bear a certain mark upon our heads, placed there by an intolerant, ignorant majority. This mark profoundly shapes our already different lives, and the shame and guilt we feel about ourselves is a direct result of it. In western cultures, it's so commonly accepted and widely understood by the nontransgendered that it goes without much discussion or debate by them. And they use it, either consciously or unconsciously, to control us. It is our *stigma*.

A stigma is a negative trait or set of traits attached to a social group. Identification with a social group - either voluntarily by self-identification, or involuntarily, by the perception or misperception of others - constitutes one's social identity. When a stigma becomes associated with a particular social identity, it usually impacts negatively on one's personal identity – as a human individual. If a strong stigma is involved, it often becomes impossible to separate personal identity from social identity. Thus one's individual accomplishments, uniqueness and intrinsic humanity all can become compromised and even dismissed, by simply being an identifiable member of a stigmatized social group. Stigmatization then, is the mass shaming of a particular social group by its society.

As transgendered people, we are very aware of our stigma. Apart from pedophiles, there is probably no greater stigmatized sexual minority on the planet than us. No matter where we turn, there is some violent homophobe confusing us with a gay man or lesbian, some cop thinking that crossdressing is probable cause for a shakedown or arrest for prostitution, or yet another pathetic episode of the *Jerry Springer* show. Indeed, the massive stigmatization of trans people is echoed and sustained by the media, which uses us as fodder for entertainment. Neither the trans-inclusive Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, with its hands full fighting homophobia in the media, nor all the emails we send in protest, can stop it. Our sporadic, uncoordinated and unsophisticated public 'gender education' efforts have only just begun to make a dent in the brick wall of transphobia.

Thus our stigma still remains fully intact, haunting us and keeping many of us isolated from other trans people. Those who do come out go to our transgendered support groups, where they become thoroughly schooled in the group-think of trans stigmatization. Stigma, of course, is portable, and if a family is involved, they too must be sheltered from our stigma. Thus our obsession with secrecy - even our paranoia - become readily justifiable, essential components of our conventional wisdom and dominant factors in our lives. As transgendered people, our stigma is immediate, ubiquitous, overwhelming and seemingly unbeatable.

But we are not alone. Other groups bear social stigmas as well – and our gay, lesbian and bisexual cousins are not the only sexual minorities who do. Leatherfolks (S&M&B&D), polyamorists, practitioners of bestiality, infantilists, necrophiliacs, fetishes of all kinds, pedophiles, of course, and so on. There are lots of sexual variations beyond vanilla heterosexuality and all carry some sort of stigma, thanks to the ruling heterosexist orthodoxy. But the public's misperception of us and the lurid, meretricious sexualization of gender makes it still the most powerful stigmatized 'sexual' practice without a victim involved.

Besides the sexual minorities, there are still others who bear social stigmas of various kinds. Alcoholics and druggies. Criminals and ex-convicts. The mentally ill. Illiterates. Phobics. The differently-abled, the Deaf, the Blind, the crippled and limb-less. Members of non-Christian religions and cults. Even the racial minorities still bear stigma, despite the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties. Obviously, ongoing educational and political efforts are yielding gradual social acceptance that may be slowly diminishing the stigmatization of many of these diverse groups. Yet the stigma still remains, silently in the background, still strong enough that the perpetrators of violence and discrimination continue to perceive and receive tacit permission to act out their hatred. After all, "everybody knows" their targets are evil, worthless, deviant, and any other less pleasant derogatories that spew from their scapegoating minds.

So, if a reasonable person finds himself or herself suddenly stigmatized, what to do about it? If a person is simply stigmatized and not legitimately crazy, some measures obviously must be taken. Ordinary concerns propel us - employment, home, public situations, everyday life, one's own safety, if not one's family - in sum, one's present, one's future, one's *life*. If it's not going away anytime soon, what can be done about stigma in the short term?

Why, *manage it*, of course.

In 1963, Erving Goffman, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, wrote a fascinating study of how various stigmatized groups cope with their social stigmas. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* was given to me by a dear friend, and as I read it slowly, over time, I became amazed at Goffman's insights. While this sixties sociology work predates feminism and Goffman mentions gays only occasionally, his book nevertheless contains some strong, inspired insights that still pertain to today's sexual minorities. Most definitely, this book applies to transgendered people - without explicitly mentioning us, Goffman wrote "it may be noted that when relatively complete passing is essayed, the individual sometimes consciously arranges his own *rite de passage*, going to another city, holing up in a room for a few days with preselected clothing and cosmetics he has brought with him, and then, like a butterfly, emerging to try the brand new wings."

His book catalogues many different types of coping mechanisms employed either commonly or solely by many different stigmatized groups. In describing the use of what he calls "softer labels" for stigma, Goffman predicts the tsunami of political correctness that engulfs discussion of minorities. Hence the disabled become "differently abled" and everyone else "temporarily abled". Alcoholics and druggies are now "substance users". And so on. Of course, transvestites and transsexuals have become "transgendered" or better still - "visibly gender variant". Public education programs also are included as another form of stigma management. A stigmatized group proffers its least visibly stigmatized members as public spokespersons, usually those who've succeeded in spite of their stigma, to present a reasoned "their side of the story" to those willing to listen. Putting a human face on a hidden stigma is exactly what we attempt in our own gender education and lobbying efforts.

Goffman draws a sharp dichotomy between stigmatized people who are discredited and those who are discreditable. The stigmata of the discredited are visible, obvious, unconcealable and intrusive, interfering with their everyday lives. Thus the discredited must focus on *tension management* - attempts to control awkward, difficult or hostile social interactions between themselves and those who Goffman calls "the normals". These tactics include using levity to make light of one's stigma, appearance manipulation, and the careful following of a sometimes elaborate "disclosure etiquette". But sadly, the acceptance by the normals of the discredited gained by these strategies is always limited. Pushing for greater acceptance - equality with the normals - breaks the commonly-accepted and well-understood rules of the game, with its reward of limited social

tolerance. Thus these discredited become labeled by the normals as "troublemakers", "militants", or "maladjusted" by psychotherapists, for their unwillingness to play their proper roles. Better put, they are condemned for their failure to remain well-behaved accomplices to their own marginalization and oppression.

On the other hand, the stigma of the discreditable are not readily apparent. Their principal strategy for coping with their stigma is, of course, passing as a member of the (unstigmatized) majority. In this country, the notion of passing as a means of escaping stigma probably first came about with regard to the races. Light-skinned African and Latino-Americans experienced somewhat less oppression than their darker-skinned counterparts, and some even assimilated completely into the Anglo population. These lighter-skinned people of color were simultaneously despised and admired by their less fortunate peers. They were despised for escaping the oppression arising from their stigma and in some cases, were perceived as abandoning their own kind. Yet they also were often admired for successfully passing and when eventually discovered, showing that their stigmatized group was really no different than the unstigmatized majority – thus proving the stigma to be false, arbitrary and unwarranted.

Freed from the need to reduce tensions in their daily interpersonal relations, the discreditable are more concerned with *information control*, or as Goffman puts it, "to tell or not to tell, to let on or not let on, to lie or not to lie, and in each case, to whom, when and where." Goffman's most striking observations are contained in his analysis of the discreditable's employ of passing and the resulting psychological costs. While materially better off, they still remain vulnerable to exposure of their stigma, and thus they "must necessarily pay a high psychological price (which includes) a high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment." They also possess a "divided affinity" - when passing as a member of the majority, they must necessarily assume the majority's disapproval of discredited minorities, while still being offended by it when voiced. Finally, the discreditable are forced to maintain extreme vigilance at all times, even in casual situations, lest their secrets become carelessly or inadvertently revealed. The relevance and importance of all these considerations to the lives of all transsexuals living in stealth should be painfully obvious.

Goffman also comments on the tactics of the "militant", who can be either a discredited person or a discreditable person who "voluntarily discloses" her stigma, or outs herself. Rather than observe the "disclosure etiquette" and play the previously mentioned social tolerance game, militants employ radical measures in dealing with, if not rejecting, their stigma. These include cold, silent stares in response to mention of their stigma, terse replies to the usual stupid questions or proffered sympathies, and even en masse entry of places denied to them – what Transgender Nation and Transexual Menace would call *direct action*. Of course, non-militant members of the stigmatized group will frown on these tactics, criticizing the militants for jeopardizing what few chances for social acceptance they have. Goffman ironically notes that in this regard, the stigmatized have become the normals, by embracing the normals' stigmatization of themselves as their own – in effect, becoming accomplices to their oppression by policing the reactions of all group members to it.

Unfortunately, Goffman avoids a larger discussion of stigma as a normative social control mechanism. He also dodges the more important question of who benefits from stigmatizing social groups, stating simply that stigma can be employed for positive and negative ends. But his brilliantly perceptive book nevertheless opened the door for today's postfeminist writers who deconstruct social identities with regard to whom is being served by their construction. And I, too, must credit Goffman here, for laying the groundwork for my transfeminist formulation of *passing privilege* – a distinct advantage that creates a power imbalance based on covert and overt forms of gender variance as exhibited by all sexual minorities. Stigma, like homophobia and gender itself, is yet another powerful social control mechanism, one which all of us must come to understand and someday, perhaps, dismantle - if we are ever to live in the sunshine of openly being ourselves.